

Tambimuttu was born on 15th August, 1915 in the village of Atchuvvely, Ceylon. He was born into an ancient Tamil family whose history could be traced through a detailed family tree going back to the Kings of Jaffna in the north of Ceylon in the twelfth century.

He developed a love of literature from an early age, and was inspired very much by his grandfather on whose press he printed his first book of poems, one of several he published before he left Ceylon in 1938 at the age of 23. Tambimuttu inherited the talent and love of the arts that had run through his family for many generations. Many of the Tambimuttu family excelled in various forms of the arts. The great indologist, Ananda K Coomaraswamy, was Tambimuttu's uncle, as was the great lexicologist, Gnana Prakasar. Other members of the family have concentrated on one or other of the arts and humanities, including music, dance, historical research etc. Tambimuttu himself wrote a jazz musical and several songs as well as poetry before leaving his homeland to conquer the London literary scene in 1938.

Although educated under the English educational system in Ceylon at St Joseph's College, run by Jesuits, Tambimuttu was deeply rooted in his traditional Hindu beliefs and philosophy, to which he always remained true. It was this that lay at the heart of his creative genius in the field of literature, poetry and the arts. He had a unique ability to recognise and draw out talent in others, a gift which, combined with a unique understanding of the true innovative nature and cyclic movement of the arts of creative expression, rooted in his Hindu philosophy, enabled him to break down the false boundaries in the arts and so to evoke the most magnificent examples of collaboration between poet, writer and artist in unified creative expression. The work for which he is most well-known is his editing of Poetry London magazine and books during the war years, during which time T S Eliot befriended him and tried to encourage him to write more of his own poetry as well as edit the works of others. Some famous examples of Tambimuttu's influence and innovation were his publication of Henry Moore's SHELTER SKETCHBOOK, Graham Sutherland's illustration of David Gascoyne's poems and Ceri Richards' illustrations of Dylan Thomas's poems. Moore and Sutherland also designed 'lyrebirds' for Tambimuttu. The Lyrebird was the symbol Tambimuttu chose and was the perfect representation of his great editorial work - the Australian Lyrebirds builds itself a mound in the middle of the forest, spreads it's tail which vibrates thousands of times a second, and then imitates all the songs of the other birds around it. Many now famous writers

and artists owe their careers to the start given them by Tambimuttu through his famous Poetry London magazine and imprint published during war-time. Tambimuttu's philosophy was expressed in his challenging editorials, particularly his very first editorial in PL1 in which he took his stand, stating that "Every man is a significant leaf of poetry, the multifoliate tree", and "every man has poetry in him". He had no time for the cliques and coteries existing at the time, or the purely academic approach to poetry. This first editorial caused quite a stir in literary London at the time.

Tambimuttu was a brilliant editor, but not a good businessman, and after a betrayal by his business partner, he returned home to Ceylon to raise more funds. He then went to America, where he quickly established himself and published four issues of Poetry London-New York, during the 1950's. The best example of his philosophy is in his most discursive editorial in Poetry London-New York No. 4. He also wrote many short stories, including a set of short stories about his childhood in Ceylon and various articles and editorials for other magazines.

While in the States Tambimuttu struck up a great friendship with Timothy Leary and was for a while a guide and teacher at Timothy Leary's 'League for Spiritual Discovery' (LSD) at Millbrook just outside New York. Tambimuttu also lived for a while in Cambridge, Massachusetts, during which time he wrote one of his greatest works, his long prose poem GITA SARASWATI. He was during that time approached to take the chair of poetry at Harvard University.

In the late 1960's, while planning to write his memoirs, Tambimuttu returned to London. He decided to return permanently to London, and in 1972 launched the Lyrebird Press with financial backing from America. (see Alan Smith's article). Under the Lyrebird Press he produced some 12 beautifully produced and illustrated volumes of poetry and prose - he believed that the production of a piece of art is as much a part of the total art form as anything else. Only a small part of Tambimuttu's memoirs, the first long chapter, was ever written and this was published in Harper's & Queen. In 1979 Tambimuttu produced the first of two of a new series of POETRY LONDON.

A year before he died he made a very successful trip to India in 1982, during which he met Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The purpose of the trip was to gather material for an Indian No. of POETRY LONDON, but it was in India that the idea was born for an Indian Arts Council, which was founded first in New Delhi and then a year later, in May 1983, one month before Tambimuttu died, The Indian Arts Council in the U.K. was born. Tambimuttu saw in the Indian Arts Council the means of fulfilment of the cycle of his work.

THE FORGOTTEN BARD

In the speckled quagmire,  
He lay, by broken lyre  
His hands shook - fine dust  
The globe thrown - the pitch.  
His eyes, cat's orbs,  
Hungering, while he grovelled.  
The outlet sealed.  
What had happened before?  
The not so long ago?

There had been crimsoned carpets.  
Champagne-strewed litter - bottles  
Bank notes, now only old newspapers  
The eiderdown ripped, the feathers strewn.  
Cool white sheets, crumpled grey.  
Planked fire, sooted embers hewn,  
All forgotten?

Only a oothless man  
With dishevelled hair,  
Arms reaching out,  
But where?  
Feet limping - gout:

.....

All should be glazed.  
None could compare.

I REMEMBER TAMBI

I remember Tambi who watched me do the t'ai-chi form and knew.

He said, 'Ah, it's a way of connecting all your chakras.'

I remember Tambi went to visit friend Mishra Guru in Monroe,  
New York, long time ago.

I remember Tambi walk into the shrine room smoking a cigarett.

I remember a young white devotee dressed in holy hindu clothes  
asked him to put his cigarette out.

I remember Tambi put his cigarette out on the shrine say, 'Oh,  
I'm perfectly sorry.'

I named my first daughter Tambi because they were born on the same day,  
August 15th, double Leos-Day of the Ascension.

I first met Tambi in the sidewalk in Greenwich Village in NY, what stree  
I can't remember but it was close to the Lion's Head Bar. It was a  
writers' watering hole. It was too dark.

I thought he was a bum, but not your ordinary kind of bum.

I remember Tambi turn into Shiva, the Destroyer. He would grow many  
arms one arm with the New York Times, one arm with a skull one arm  
with whatever turns up like bombs, or a bottle of beer, Phillip  
Morris cigarettes. And that uncanny laugh of his that came from  
the bowels of the earth, it seemed.

I remember Tambi who wrote the poem 'At last the splendid rain is  
falling.'

I remember Tambi make a curry in a hurry in small apartment in the  
village, cackling, 'Hehehheh, curry in a hurry.'

I remember Tambi tell me the truth about the universe one summer night  
camping in upstate New York just outside of Guru Mishra's ashram.

The stars were in the blue sky, he said, 'Nothing is more profound than the rock you sit on.'

I remember Tambi when he turned me into Subalakshmi - that's when he would turn into Shiva.

I remember the sixties and Tambi was a colossal part of it.

I remember Tambi taught me to die before you can be born again, to destroy so you can create, to laugh if you die at all.

I remember Tambi's white lion mane.

I remember Tambi's phone book. It had everybody's signature in it. He would call them at a whim.

I remember my phone bill.

I remember Henry Miller, the Queen of England, Lawrence Durrell, Tim Leary, Andy Warhol, James Dickey, Joe Smoe... it goes on. Everybody is in it like the telephone book.

I remember Tim Leary come to the house with everybody Naked, Tambi greeting him at the door, and everybody naked except me.

It was the bar named the Ideal, generally known as the Ordeal, on Hudson Street between Perry and Eleventh in New York. A long dark dirty bar, low and narrow, diagonally across and taking what trade it had from the overflow and the expelled of the White Horse Tavern. It was late summer of 1959. The Angel was on the bar, enormous with tight skin the shade of drug store counter marble drawn across the large frontal lumps of his forehead and irregular grey bratwurst fingers with swollen knuckles that made me think of National Geographic cave formations.

I had been drinking for a while. I had just moved to the Village off a ruined marriage, and I was remarkably lonely. I got up, beer in hand, to play the jukebox near the door. A big man with a small blond walrus mustache, not tall but maybe 250 pounds, as he blustered into the bar with two taller men behind him, bumped my arm, deliberately as I saw it, spilling the beer. A clear and public insult. All my loneliness and bitterness seemed to rise up with my anger. I didn't think about odds or numbers or weight. I went at him.

Suddenly the Angel had vaulted over the bar and many people were around us. I was persuaded to return to my seat, the big man and the other two shooed to the street end of the bar.

I drank at my new beer. I am sure I made myself appear calm and hard, but my outrage and anger were fading fast to something like bravado when a soft voice to my right said "Don't hurt him; he's sick."

"Yeh, he'll be a lot fucking sicker"--

"No no, I know him. He really is sick." In the dark bar mirror I was aware of the figure at my right tapping at his forehead. After a pause the figure said

"What's your name?"

Surprised, relieved too I suppose at something so quiet and human in this milieu, I looked to my right and saw what I thought

in this gratuitously hostile setting, I looked at a short thin brown man with a very little smile at the corners of his mouth. He had a narrow, elevated forehead which didn't seem enough to yet did support his wideset soft untroubled eyes. From his hair I knew he must be old -- I was 34 -- but I felt rather that I was looking into timeless boyishness. He had on a bedraggled chamois-type dark green shirt and khakis. I knew he was OK. I signalled The Angel to give us two beers. And I told the man my name.

"You are Welsh." At that I lighted up.

"My father was."

"Then we are brothers, you see."

"Oh?" I didn't see.

"Dravidian brothers."

The Angel has given us our beer and busied himself at the street end of the bar. I stand and look to the mirror over the bottles. So does Tambi. I am surprised: he is not short but a good deal taller than I. I am summer brown, he much browner; my hair brown with an ashy summer gold in it, his black verging on grey. His face is lean and fine, mine chunky, blurred, not quite fat. Nevertheless I think I see that somehow it is the same face. We sit again.

"Do you really mean it?" I have been looking for a brother all my life.

"Of course I mean it." For the first time he sounds a little Indian, an interesting didactic lilt to the voice. "The Dravidians sailed the west coast of Britain 3000 years before Christ. Dravidian-Druid: same thing. My brother Singam studies all this. He has been 20 years"-- a little smile runs across his face -- "writing a book about it."

"I'd like to read it." I chuckle. "I guess it ought to be

out soon."

Tambi considers a moment. "I don't think so. It's exhaustive, you see."

"Where is he a professor?"

"Not a professor," he says with faint distaste. "He works by day - British Civil Service -- and writes at night."

I am very American, and everything he says seems at the least implausible. But I believe it anyway.

"He sings gloriously," Tambi goes on, "fantastic sincerity, delicacy."

"Indian songs?"

"No, French love songs. Only French love songs." His face erupts into a long giggle of glee. "He is madly in love with my wife."

"It's good you're not annoyed."

"Good God, why should I be annoyed?"

"I think I'd be annoyed."

"Good God, you Americans don't seem to understand anything. You have lost your bloody lyricism."

There was actually nothing unkind in the tone of this observation, but it reminded me of a desolating disability I suffered: I was unable to look at anything easily, naturally, with the eyes of a boy. With love. I had to measure, compare, judge. In short I never or almost never enjoyed anything.

"Maybe I have lost my lyricism," I said after a moment, "but I can sing like a bird. And sometimes like a bull."

"Can you? Good. But then all Welsh can sing. Sing me a song."

I looked to the street end of the bar. "Not here," I said. "We'll go to my place. Right around the corner."

So we did. To 396 Bleecker. One large room with



bookshelves on three sides, over a garden. A perfect room for a scholar, as I told my therapist. But no scholar there. "He is always at the bar.

Tambi liked my voice a lot, and we sang at each other for several hours. About three in the morning he started talking about Wales. It seemed he just had to call the Brenterion Inn in Llanderfell. It seemed he had accompanied a friend -- Robin Waterfield I think -- there as his best man some fifteen years before, had so to speak commandeered the place, persuading or maybe bullying them to keep it open continuously for three days, had danced on tables, had ...

"Go ahead," I said. "It seems like a good idea."

The person who took the call didn't know Tambi but the owner, whom he summoned, did. Tambi talked excitedly to three or four people over most of an hour.

"We must go there one day, Fred," he said when he hung up. "You will adore it. Masses and masses of lovely people. Pots and pots of liquor."

I had no money then. Tambi clearly didn't. But I imagined Tambi and me climbing toward it, high on a hillside, white with red shutters and great wide porches over the green happy hill.

Tambi left about dawn. We began to see a great deal of each other after that, and in 1963, at probably the lowest point of his stay in Angelica Amelica, he came to stay with me for nine months. They were bad times for both of us, and I drank a lot and did things for which I suppose I will always feel bad. I can't conceive Tambi feeling bad for anything he ever did. Whatever it is in westerners and particularly Americans that makes them sick and uncomfortable with themselves was not in Tambi. So many other marvelous things were that there never would have been room for it.

I have never mourned anybody less, perhaps partly because so much of him has come over to me and remains. I think that is true of everyone who knew him well. My wife Telo Reifel wrote a play, SWAN, whose pivotal character was formed from her picture of Tambi. ~~BIRTHDAY~~ TEAPARTY CAKE is a story my daughter just completed celebrating him. He is very much with us, always. All of us grew up at least in part little, mean, envious, sullen, moneybound. His spirit that abided none of these things, that hardly honored them with recognition, offered us a focus, a hope, a way west.

Tambi and I never did get to the Brenterion Inn. If I ever do I will see him as I clamber up the green hillside, beckoning and calling from the wide porch "Hurry, Fred, all our friends are here. Hurry! It's the most magnificent pahty."

GRAY HENRY GOUVERNEUR

Tambi, remember New York of the sixties -  
Millbrook, the gatehouse and pond,  
Meadows surrounded by forests with deer.  
The Hitchcocks, Peggy and Billy up at the Big House  
Your stay with Tim and the shifting population -  
The Day your princely clothes vanished - for good.

The City - just above Washington Square near Kingsley Amis  
Readings of your poetry on Lower Fifth Avenue.  
Your friend - with the electric trains -  
Did he live in the Village?  
The entire back room - tracks and tunnels -  
What days they were!

PRAFULLA MOHANTI

REMEMBERING TAMBI

It was at the beginning of my career as a painter, I had just given up my secure job as an architect. I was in Paris in the spring of 1971 and looking for a gallery to show my paintings. An art dealer who liked my work said that an Indian publisher in London had been looking for an artist to illustrate an anthology of poems. He suggested I got in touch with him and gave me his name and telephone number.

On my return to London, I telephoned the publisher and made an appointment to meet him at eleven the next morning. The address he gave was near Gloucester Road tube station. I was living in Wapping then and it was a change for me to visit the West End. It was a glorious spring day. The sun was shining and the sky was blue. The house was situated in a beautiful square and the trees were covered in blossom. I rang the doorbell. A dreamy-eyed man with long flowing hair opened the door. To my surprise he was still in his dressing gown and introduced himself to me as Tambimuttu. He looked as if he had just got out of bed. I apologised for having disturbed his sleep, but he said this was how he spent his days. He was drinking black coffee and offered me a cup. Then he told me about his publishing project. He had just arrived from New York where he had spent several years. We talked about India, art and mutual friends. Then I showed him a sample of paintings which I had carried with me. He said he liked them and particularly my use of colour and light, but the reproductions would be in black and white. He could not afford to print in colour, he said. He asked if I would do some small

paintings for him in black and white, keeping the spirit of my works in colour. He wanted a dozen and I said I would try and send them to him.

The idea of getting my works reproduced in a book was exciting. I spent several hours experimenting. I personally do not use black as a colour in my paintings but I thought of it as a challenge. I painted a number, selected a dozen and sent them to him. I hoped to hear from him but there was total silence. I wanted to telephone to ask if he liked them, but was apprehensive in case he said no.

I got involved in my own life and art. The black and white watercolour paintings helped me to move on to other works in colour. Occasionally, when I met some literary people and asked if they knew Tambimuttu, they all spoke very enthusiastically about him.

Several years passed. One evening I had gone to the October Gallery in Bloomsbury to see an exhibition. I heard a voice, 'Prafulla, how nice to see you!' It was Tambimuttu, looking thin and like a sage. His publications were on display. He showed me the book in which he had used some of my drawings. 'The October Gallery is selling them,' he said, 'but I will send you a copy.' I gave him my address. The book never arrived.

A few years later the telephone rang one evening. It was Tambimuttu. He spoke enthusiastically about starting a new organisation to be called the Indian Arts Council. They would hold exhibitions and he would like me to be its art adviser. I promised to help him. But shortly afterwards I was shocked to hear that he had died.

I attended the meeting at the Bharatiya Bhavan to celebrate his life and work. A large number of people attended. We were all different yet Tambi had brought us together. He was a man of ideas. But I shall remember Tambi for the appreciation he gave me when I needed it most.

Prafulla Mohanti

PRISONER

Ten steps north and ten  
South in this peeling  
Doorless dungeon  
From dawn to dark  
And winter to summer rain

A prisoner born  
To metaphor of being,  
Of death and the dim shore  
Landscaped in his own  
Meaning.

He paces counting images  
Ten steps north and ten  
South  
Of faith frail in  
The grief of certainties

And sees his shadow posture  
On walls of argument  
In the dungeon  
The passing  
Days behind him lit.

In the evening his principles  
On wings bear him away  
And sing hosannas to the life  
And death of things.

RAKSHAT PURI

LETTER TO A TIBETAN FRIEND

Feed roses to crows and  
songs to rockers. Far

this side of Jelep-la I  
know now to be alone  
is not to be lonely  
and know

alone-ness in mountains is  
as alone-ness in deserts and  
may be shared but never  
ended.

And I know also alone-ness in  
crowds is as alone-ness  
in mountains and deserts when  
frisking

eyes wave aside a million unseeing  
looks and frame previous answers  
to questions which may never  
be asked.

Feed frontiers to rhetoric, peace  
to pop-politicans. Come



with your mountains carrying  
compassion and share alone-ness  
in this warring arc of wide  
desert.

ONE VIEW OF CRAFTSMANSHIP IN VERSE

The tracing and defining of the element or elements that transform verse into poetry were best left to critics and to the Muse's own inexplicable ways. The practising poet might wisely stay clear of the fog of nebulous terms such as emotion, tradition, psychoanalysis, intuitive feeling etc., and concern himself immediately with the craft of verse. Ezra Pound who listed some very practical do's and don't's for the aspiring poet noticeably refrained from emphasis on poetry; he referred to the craft of verse. Poetry comes or doesn't; and that seems all there is to say definitely about Poetry.

The poet might, then, do well to begin by asking himself the meaning of craftsmanship in verse. There are of course the tools of verse, and the techniques of using them - rhyme, metre, rhythm, incantatory devices, rhetoric, and so on. But these are only the tools, and they could be compared, for approach, to the tools of, say, a carpenter.

A carpenter will use his tools to make, for example, a piece of furniture, perhaps an office chair. He will however use the tools to shape an office chair in his own style, even if the chair must accord to a given design: the chiselling, planing, joining, wedging, rolling etc. will all have his characteristic mark. Other carpenters will use similar tools to shape similar office chairs, and they will do it each in his own particular way and style. As, indeed, two poets writing sonnets on the same theme and subject will produce work very different and particular to himself.

The way to craftsmanship in verse - as possibly in other vocations and disciplines, including carpentry - would seem to lie

in the poet's identifying his own personal style of perceiving and ordering. That is, in a continuing endeavour to discover the factors particular to his individual gesture of mind, which differentiate it and make it characteristic of himself.

Essentially, then, each poet must discover craftsmanship in verse for himself, making use in ordering his words of the 'common' tools and techniques of rhyme, rhythm, metre, rhetoric etc. to hammer, chisel, plane, join, wedge, perfect texture; but keeping in mind his tryst with words, living with them and in them, knowing their real life. There is no general mapped-out path to such acquaintance with craftsmanship in verse. The poet may be directed by another to the sense of craftsmanship in verse; he must reach it himself, like the carpenter, shoe-maker, potter arrive at their craftsmanship.

Seeking and identifying personal style is inevitably a lifetime's occupation, a continuing 'interior monologue' as life unreels an involvement of inner feeling and outer phenomena. E.L. Epstein says in his Language and Style (Methuen & Co., London, 1978) that the interior monologue 'egoizes' - not as happy an expression as might be - our outer and inner realities in a 'sub-auditory stream', and that 'we listen to others to know them; we speak to ourselves to understand ourselves'. Indeed we listen not only to others but also to ourselves - our many selves.

The conglomeration of his impressions and perceptions confront the poet when he is with himself, most often perhaps in the still of the night, as they did Dylan Thomas: 'In my craft or sullen art / Exercised in the still of night / When only the moon rages / And the lovers lie abed / With all their griefs in their arms, / I labour by singing light...' If not by the still of night,

then the still of any time because it is - leaving out individual ways and habits - in stillness that a person might hear his own voice most clearly, and speak with himself most concentratedly.

In the stillness of himself the poet orders the conglomeration of impressions and perceptions in nature, love, birds and bees and potatoes, politics, wealth, poverty and roses, race and equality etc. in a quick and carrying stream of eddies and undercurrents. And the ordering must, one presumes, follow his individual gesture of thought and feeling, a sequential exteriorizing and compression in words that are charged with his sense and signification, contain him as one whole complex.

The late Tambimuttu used (in course of an editorial, 'Fourth Letter', in Poetry London-New York, Summer 1960) an apt phrase for this: what, eh said, 'I shall term the holophrastic process (holophrasis: Gk. holis = whole, phrasis = phrase, 'the expression of a complex of ideas by a single word' - Webster) which, in my extended sense, gives poetry its form and substance'. He added, further on: 'Poetic perception unites the things known with the knower, who is also the universe of the poem. Poetic synthesis happens in a flash because the poet has become the objects of the phenomenal world of matter and individualized consciousness.'

The poet, in exteriorizing the 'interior monologue', becomes not only the phenomenal world of matter and individualized consciousness, but becomes also the words by which he calls them. One might, risking dismissal for 'metaphysicalizing', add that he becomes thus the prime symbol of what he perceives; and the conjunction of what he perceives and how he perceives it.

In the same editorial, Tambimuttu remarked that the poet's 'ecstasy is similar to the mystic's when he is one with his object

by awakening of senses through concentration on his object or element. (That which is really our own we are one with. Hence the human act of love is taken as the symbol of mystical experience, a passionate striving to become one.) In this way the poet and the 'lover' open their conscious selves to universals'.

The poet, then, identifies himself as at once noun and verb; that is, he understands noun and verb are not isolated abstractions in nature, whatever grammarians say. In life and nature a stone is, a man is, the poet is. It is curious that this implicit furthering of Tambimuttu's delineation of the poetic process should tend to coincide with a view that Ezra Pound projected through the work of Ernest Fenollosa which he edited (The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry). Curious, because Tambimuttu appears to have had little in common with the active aesthetic of Ezra Pound. But it is also understandable: both men explored the poetic craft genuinely. And it is significant that they should have arrived on the same path, coming from such different ways.

Fenollosa says: 'A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snapshots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things...'.

As an abstract motion is not possible in nature, so we cannot conceive of time and space in isolation from each other. A stone, a man, the poet, then, is not only is but also is-becoming. The poet changes; all phenomena changes. Craftsmanship in verse involves therefore the continuous ordering of continuous chaos as time turns feelings and phenomena kaleidoscopically.

Verse then must be organic. Craftsmanship in verse has to rise equal to compressing past and future into now so that a totality is discernible in every part of the whole - word to image to poem to poet.

Rakshat Puri

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### Happy Tea Party Cake

Tambi is still asleep. It's only nine in the morning so I don't know why I think he'll be awake; he never wakes up til noon. "I am an Injun," he tells me, "and in Ceylon we wake when we like, and I like noon: A good solid hour. Anyway, nothing of importance evah happens before noon. Nothing whatsoever."

That's how our routine begins. Then I'll tell him that I go to school before noon and he'll say, "School is nothing. It's life, bloody life, where you'll learn, ducky. School, my deah, is where they send you so you don't get into trouble; so you don't have any bloody fun. Ignore it, it will pass."

After that I'll look at him with this certain adults-try-my-patience look. It's taken me all twelve years of my life to get it just right, but he pays no attention and goes into his "Injun Dance". He hops around in circles, his gray-streaked shoulder-length black hair flying about his head, as he chants, "TUM-tickee, TUM-tickee, tickee-tickee-TUM." It always makes me laugh. We have pretty much this same conversation every day. He's not too sure how to talk to someone my age and the routine helps us get through the awkward spots.

Tambi sleeps in the spare bed in the dining-room. He starts snoring while I'm standing there looking down at all the hair he has in his ears. I look around the dining-room and think, nobody else in

the world has a spare bed in their dining-room, but it doesn't make me feel special. Nobody else has a gold-painted upright piano either, and only in Japan is a <sup>family's</sup> families' dining-room table a mere foot off the floor. My mother built the table before my parents got divorced, and since she's no carpenter she figured she'd better stay low to the ground in case the whole thing ever falls apart. She says the room is too big to have only the table, little chinese hat-shaped wicker chairs and a bunch of cushions in it; it needs all the other things. I'm embarrassed by the combination, but I'm embarrassed by a lot of stuff around the house these days. That's why I never invite my friends over.

The last person I had over was Maureen. She's not my friend any more but she used to be my best friend. Maureen said the phone in the kitchen was dusty and made a face. She looked around the kitchen, at the thick yellow, grease and smoke-stained walls, and asked if the kitchen was ever going to be repainted. She said, "Why don't you paint it the color of the piano?" and laughed. She looked at the bed in the dining-room and said she'd never seen anything like that before. Then she asked me why my mother always dressed so funny.

My mother is a nurse, but that's not what Maureen was talking about. When my mother is off-duty she wears black pants, black sweaters, black turtlenecks, anything as long as it's black and not a dress. It bothers me, especially when she comes to my school. Everyone else's mother looks like a mother. My mother looks like she accidentally wandered out of Greenwich Village and into a PTA meeting. She tells



the world has a spare bed in their dining-room, but it doesn't make me feel special. Nobody else has a gold-painted upright piano either, and only in Japan is a <sup>family's</sup> families' dining-room table a mere foot off the floor. My mother built the table before my parents got divorced, and since she's no carpenter she figured she'd better stay low to the ground in case the whole thing ever falls apart. She says the room is too big to have only the table, little chinese hat-shaped wicker chairs and a bunch of cushions in it; it needs all the other things. I'm embarrassed by the combination, but I'm embarrassed by a lot of stuff around the house these days. That's why I never invite my friends over.

The last person I had over was Maureen. She's not my friend any more but she used to be my best friend. Maureen said the phone in the kitchen was dusty and made a face. She looked around the kitchen, at the thick yellow, grease and smoke-stained walls, and asked if the kitchen was ever going to be repainted. She said, "Why don't you paint it the color of the piano?" and laughed. She looked at the bed in the dining-room and said she'd never seen anything like that before. Then she asked me why my mother always dressed so funny.

My mother is a nurse, but that's not what Maureen was talking about. When my mother is off-duty she wears black pants, black sweaters, black turtlenecks, anything as long as it's black and not a dress. It bothers me, especially when she comes to my school. Everyone else's mother looks like a mother. My mother looks like she accidentally wandered out of Greenwich Village and into a PTA meeting. She tells

me she can't afford new clothes, or that I'm being idiotic. It doesn't matter what she says, she knows it bothers me; she thinks I'm ashamed of her.

After Maureen had left I mentioned just the dust to my mother, but all she said was, "Do I look like a maid?" I don't have to worry about what Maureen thinks any more, but I haven't invited my new friends over and I'm not about to start to now.

Just this past Christmas, a Sunday not even a month ago, my stepfather felled the Christmas tree with one sweep of his hand, then, with only slightly more effort, he pulled over the bookcases. My mother, valuing books only slightly less than life itself, protested and he toppled her too. One partially blind eye later, she took out a court order and changed the locks on the door. But he's a big man, a bricklayer, and we live in a state of nervous tension because he just might want to come back, and neither one of us trusts a door with him on the other side of it.

I'm mad about how things are turning out. No one else I know has a life like this. I wish my mother would fix things so they were a little more normal. Instead, she keeps telling me about the days when I used to kiss her hand as we walked down the street.

I push the swinging kitchen door open; it makes more noise that way. I look back but he hasn't moved a muscle. The kitchen smells like last night's curry, the dishes are still piled up on the counter. Tambi cooks for my mother and me every night. He likes to

cook, but the only thing he likes to cook, maybe the only thing he can cook, is curry. My mother likes curry and hates to cook so she's happy with our new meal plan. I don't mind curry, especially not chicken curry which we get when we don't get shrimp curry, or just plain curry, but I do miss hamburgers. I made the mistake of mentioning that to Tambi just the other day when he was in the middle of making one of his "creations". I thought he'd jump out the window.

"Hamburger? Not while I'm the chef. Too pedestrian," he said.

"Meat. That's what's wrong with this bloody country; you people eat too much meat. Makes you crazy. Makes you wage wars. Makes you bloody, blasted nuts," he yelled, swinging a long wooden spoon around his head like a banshee.

The one thing Tambi doesn't like to do in the kitchen is to clean. Who would, after what he does to a kitchen. He does use the sink though, as an ashtray. "Why wash more than you have to?" he says.

I wash all the dishes, then begin moving the pots and pans off the stove and into the sink. I like the stove. It's an old enamel body gas stove, trimmed in black. I like the way it's set off by the linoleum floor. The floor looks like driven-over confetti and I like to think that the stove just had a party thrown in its honor.

Our kitchen is just big enough to stand around in. Not the kind you can fit a table in, and not the kind that's so small it might as well be a closet. My mother has fixed rice paper over the one window and splotched<sup>it</sup> with markings she made with a thin Chinese writing

brush and India ink. She always calls it her Rorschach window. I just found out that Rorschach isn't an artist. My father told me.

My parents have been divorced since I was six. They still fight a lot, but when anything goes wrong he tries to help out. He sent us Tambi -- not forever, just until things settle down a little. Tambi had been living in the basement of my father's brownstone in Brooklyn for nearly a year. I figure my father needed a break.

It's not like Tambi can do anything to protect us if my stepfather does decide to come crashing through the door. Tambi is six feet tall, but skinny, his wrists aren't much bigger than my mother's, and he's not too coordinated. Still, we all feel better that he's around the house. In fact, he rarely leaves it.

"Injuns," he says, "have good imaginations, you know. And we meditate. It's most restful. You must try it some time." Since he watches the soaps all day, and I never see him do anything but read or try to talk to me at night, I still haven't figured out when he actually does it, but he swears he does and there's no arguing with Tambi.

It's almost ten o'clock by the time I'm finished with the dishes, but I hang around the kitchen thinking that my father should be calling soon and I want to be able to grab the phone before it wakes my mother. She has enough trouble sleeping as it is. My father calls every day lately, just to make sure my stepfather hasn't come back and murdered us all.

I used to visit my father every weekend, but now that I'm

almost a teen-ager I stay home more often. My friends and I go to the movies or walk around in the park. It's important for me to hang around with them; we have more to talk about. My father understands. "I know, kid," he tells me, "no fun hanging around the old farts. It's o.k., I won't knock you out of the will over this."

I stayed home for a different reason this weekend. I wanted to make sure I had all the props set for our class play on Tuesday. The props are at school, but I figured I could concentrate on them better by hanging around the house. My father said that didn't make much sense to him, but "a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do."

I'm not actually in the play, but I'm the stage manager and my parents are going to come and see it anyway. When my father finally calls he tells me he'll even pick my mother up and bring her to the school. Then he asks if I want to invite Tambi.

"Ah dad," I say, "Tambi looks so weird. He'll wear that long coat..."

My father interrupts. "That's an old Victorian frock coat that belonged to his grandfather. Anyway, those are his clothes, what the hell do you expect him to wear."

"But he looks funny," I say.

"So what. So he doesn't look like everybody else at your fancy school. What are you, voting Republican in the next election?"

I giggle.

"Wake his Injun ass up," he commands. "He's family and I'm

inviting him."

I give a couple of yells and hand the phone through the door so Tambi doesn't have to get up. About two minutes later he gives me a raspy, "Yoo=hoo ducky, how about taking this awful weapon of disruption back from whence it came."

My mother, who gets up every half-hour on account of her being nervous, comes into the dining-room. Tambi and I are laughing because I've just called him a lazy Injun and he's pretending to be deeply hurt.

"My gawd," she mumbles, "is the whole world awake?" Then she smiles. I think she's happy to find us awake and laughing.

Tambi climbs out of bed. He's always dressed in at least a dhoti. "Just in case," he's told me, "that monster comes back. Must be ready for action at all times." He says it to make me laugh but it never does.

Tambi and my mother have known each other for years so she feels right at home bumping around the kitchen with him. They start trying to make coffee: they spill things; Tambi drops a saucepan and bangs his head on the counter-ledge as he's picking it up. My mother catches her robe in the refrigerator door and when, in annoyance, she flings the door open it flies into Tambi and, catching him by surprise, throws him off balance and he falls against the little ladder and then bangs his head on the wall.

I'm getting pretty hungry so I offer to make breakfast if they'll get out of my way. Tambi only likes to cook dinner so he agrees.

"Ducky," he says, patting me on the shoulder, "you're a peach. We'll have an old-fashioned American breakfast. Pancakes! Yes. And bacon and eggs and toast. What else? I've forgotten. Coffee, and orange juice. Now I've got it all. Good, good." He bustles into the dining-room rubbing his hands excitedly. My mother and I raise our eyes at each other and smile as we hear him rummaging around in his pile of clothes. "I'm going for the papah. I feel like a real citizen now...yes, a real American," he chatters, and then we hear the door slam.

After we've eaten my mother offers to help me re-clean the kitchen. Tambi, on the other hand, says he feels the need of a nice long bath.

First he starts the tub running. Then he drags this old piece of wood he adopted from my father's basement into the bathroom and lays it across the tub. After that he steals a standing lamp from the living room and sets that up in the bathroom.

"I cahn't stand all that bright light,,you know," he confides to us. "How you Americans can lie naked in the tub with that brilliant light blaring down on you is something this poor savage cannot understand. It's like being bloody interrogated while you wash your toes. Rathah crude," he mutters as he collects about fifty sheets of blank paper and a bunch of pencils to bring along to the bathroom.

I ask him if he's going to write poetry in the bathtub.

"Sometimes," he explains, "one is inspired when one is relaxed and wet."

When the water and everything else is set just as he likes, he trundles off with his cleanest dhoti dragging behind, and a copy of the Oxford Book of English Verse under his arm.

"In case nothing much comes to mind," he says over his shoulder.

"You'd think he was on a pilgrimage to the Ganges for all the fuss he makes," is my mother's only comment.

"Yeah," I say, "and he'll be done as soon as the kitchen is clean."

It's fun cleaning the kitchen with my mother. She is in a good mood, humming in her off-key way while we work. Putting things away in the refrigerator reminds me of the time our kitten leapt into the fridge when no one was looking and had to be revived with warm milk and brandy; just like an avalanche victim, my father said.

I ask my mother if she remembers how she and my father made the kitten a little towel bed against one of the stove's graceful, sloping feet. They wanted to make certain he stayed warm all night. She remembers. It was only a few months before she figured out what my father was really doing when he said he was working late.

I don't want her to start going on about the old days, so I mention that Tambi is coming to the play.

"That was sweet of you to invite him," she says, looking proud. I don't bother to tell her that it wasn't exactly my idea.

"Yeah, well, I just hope he doesn't look too funny," I say. That was a mistake. I can tell she's thinking about how I feel about



her clothes by the way her look of pride disappears and her big eyes fill with pain. I notice that the left one is still bruised.

"Well," I say, trying to save things, "Tambi looks like a crazy person." I smile, but I can see it isn't going to work.

Finally she says, "Maybe it's better if I don't go." She touches her bad eye gently. "This," she shrugs, "this still shows. You don't want to have your mother walking around the school with dark glasses. It would look bad."

"Mom, don't. It's o.k."

"I'm going back to bed," she says, and is gone.

I feel like the floor just fell away and then I'm crying hard into the sink. I hear Tambi coming and rush to turn the water on; I don't <sup>want</sup> him to know I'm crying.

He comes through the door as I scrub my face with cold water. He's singing his Injun song, but he stops when he sees me. "What do you think of my voice, ducky? Can you see it, a recital in Carnegie Hall. They'll be tossing roses and daffodils. I love daffodils. They're so bloody cheerful they have no right to be on this earth."

I try smiling but it doesn't come out right. He stares and says, "You're looking a bit rocky, if you don't mind my saying." I shrug. "The kitchen looks mahvelous - you two did a bloody good job. It's quite clean enough to throw a pahty in." He pauses while I pretend to scrub the sink. "For your play! Yes, we'll invite all of your classmates over and have a lovely pahty with balloons and cake and

maybe a little bit of Scotch for myself."

"I don't think so, Tambi. Mom's not coming to the play so I don't think a party's such a great idea."

"What? Your mothah not coming? What's this nonsense? Of course she's coming. Wouldn't miss it for the world. Nor would I. We're all coming and we'll have a lovely time afterward."

I explain about the black clothes, about her eye.

"Well, she can wear dark glasses. They'll think she's someone famous, like Sophia Loren. It'll make the whole evening more exciting." He flaps his hands around.

I hate to stop him, I wish everything he said would be true.

"Tambi, she's not coming. That's all. She's mad at me, I made her feel bad."

"Ahh," he says, nodding. "But I think she isn't mad at all. Just a little blue. What she needs is some cheering up and what's the best way to cheer someone up?"

"I dunno. Maybe she just wants to be left alone."

"None sense. No one evah really wants to be left alone. Now, the best thing to do for someone who's feeling a little down is to throw them a pahty." He claps his hands. "And that's what we'll bloody well do."

He starts throwing open the cupboards in search of cake mix.

"Good, here's some mix. All Americans have cake mix, you know. Now, off you go to find me some clothes of yours to wear. We're going to

dress up as each other and surprise her. Find some balloons too."

I go to my room and search the book-shelves until I find a couple of balloons left in a little package from a birthday party a couple of years ago. The only thing I can find to fit Tambi is my crazy cotton bathrobe. It's too big for me but I made my mother buy it because it's bright red and covered with orange clowns. My mother was surprised, I'm usually more sedate, but it makes me feel good to wear it. I pretend I'm in the circus.

Tambi loves the robe even though the sleeves end halfway up his arm and it's a little snug around the shoulders. He picks out his most beautiful dhoti for me. It's sky-blue and made of silk. I put it on over my clothes. It almost comes down to my ankles, and the sleeves have to be rolled up, but Tambi says I look like a royal Indian princess.

We blow up the balloons and Tambi ices the cake. "Good," he says, "it's two o'clock, time for early tea." He writes "Happy Tea Party Cake" on a piece of paper and sticks it through a toothpick in the center of the cake. Then he puts the cake on the biggest platter he can find and hands it to me.

"This is silly," I say, but he ignores me.

"I'll carry the balloons," he says. "Now, into the hallway so the procession can begin."

He stands behind me, holding the balloons over my head like an umbrella. "Walk slowly at first, I have to warm up a little."

We walk down the hallway. Tambi starts chanting his Injun song: "TUM-tickee, TUM-tickee, tickee-tickee-TUM," slowly at first, then faster and louder the closer we get to my mother's room. He bats me on the head with the balloons when we're almost there. "You sing too," he says. So I do.

James Meary Tambimuttu was born at Atchuvveli Jaffna, a village famous for its astrologers. Did they predict a bright future for him?

'No', says Tambi. 'They predicted that I would lead a mendicant's life.'

Instead, Tambi scattered largesse wherever he went. He was the prince of Bohemia, who gave gold and got pence in return.

Once, Mathew Arnold described poetry as a criticism of life. To Tambi it was the essence of life, the Jeeva Nadi (nerve centre) as he put it, and to the end the Muse never deserted him.

Tambi joined the old University College at a time when a degree and a government job was the ultimate in a young man's life. It was the year 1937, eve of World War II.

It was indeed a very good year for those bright young sparks who sported Oxford bags and knitted ties with a feather in their felt hats.

They adopted an intellectual pose. The women had an air of aloofness which led Janus to describe them as 'sick headaches in colourful sarees.'

It was certainly a brilliant crew! Pieter Keuneman, dashing and debonair, P. Nadesan, every inch a future civil servant, S.P. Amerasingham, Roving Raju and a serious young woman, Theja Piyadasa, later to become Theja Gunawardena. Into this company, Tambi wafted in like a summer breeze.

His disarming smile would melt even Suntharalingam, who sometimes came to lecture in gown and trencher, wearing tennis shoes!

Tambi had even at that time dropped the initials in front of his name - a sign of revolt against parental authority. He was not quite serious about his studies though he held a science scholarship from St. Joseph's.

Very often he would cut lectures and creep through the race-

course fence to place a bet or two on the 'Gandhi' side. This was rather a derogatory term for that section of the race-course frequented by scavenger women and estate 'coolies'.

The future prince of Bohemia was at home anywhere, but seeing me hesitate, he said curtly, 'Don't be a dead rope!' I must have cut a sorry figure in my prim and proper suit.

Tambi placed a fifty-cents bet on a horse called Jandahar. I followed suit, but to my consternation, and Tambi's immense delight, that intrepid animal at the crack of the pistol, turned and ran in the opposite direction, leaving the riding boy on the ground!

Whenever I pass College House, I always think of Tambi, the soul and life of a party in the tuck-shop. There was nothing under the sun that they did not discuss. Tambi's bonhomie was only a cover for that deep-seated passion for the spoken word.

He also composed a number of 'pop' songs. Sometimes, he would sing 'Colombo Moon' with a banjo on his knee. I believe it was the song that was a hit at Woolworth's in later years.

All this was not to last forever. The band of young men and women who came to the university with great hopes had by 1939 disbanded and gone their various ways.

Keuneman left for Cambridge, Nadesan was in the upper reaches of British bureaucracy, SP and Theja were fellow-travellers trying to 'remould the world nearer to their heart's desire'.

After a brief spell in the finance department of the post office, Tambi had left by the first boat to England to face the task which he was destined to do.

By now, the war years had turned the world into a behemoth. To add to my misery I had to pay the price for failure to get a degree. I became a 'clerical servant' in the road branch of the PWD. After six months, I quit. I wrote to the assistant director of public works, Mr Barker, a curt note:

Dear Sir, please accept this as my notice of resignation from  
... 1939. Reason for leaving:

What is this life if full of care

We have no time to stand and stare?

Had it not been for Tambi's example, I might never have written this note, but his influence on my life and Alagasubramaniam's has been so subtle, that we could never belong to the Establishment again.

Alagu had already left for England to become a barrister. It was my turn to make a decision. Without a word to anyone I left for India, hoping to collect material for a novel on that sub-continent. Vijaya Tunga, the author of 'Grass for My Feet', was already an exile in Delhi.

It was here, too, that I met a young man of my age, Jag Mohan. He was working on the 'Sunday Standard' in Bombay and kept the image of the poet Tambi alive in Mahim and Byculla and the 'My coffee' bars in Hornby Road (now Mahatma Gandhi Road).

Here long-haired poets sat all day long over cashew nuts and coffee discussing Ezra Pound and the Waste Land. Very often they discussed Tambi and George Keyt, the two Ceylonese who had caught their fancy.

When Jag Mohan returned to his native Madras I went with him. And with us we carried the legend of Tambi to the heart of Vepery, where avante garde writers practised a cult called 'Beyond Communism'. 'Beyond communism' was written by M.N. Roy, but our interpretation of his thesis was to suit our convenience.

So, when one went 'Beyond Communism', one 'shared and shared alike'. To a poor man like me, it was an ideal way of living.

If one wanted a shirt, one had merely to take it. One did not have to ask the owner's permission. To ask would be to beg.

One did not have to wheedle or cajole. Just take! Even the doors of one's house were open night and day!

There were various shades of 'Beyond Communism'. Tambi was one kind of exponent in Fitzrovia. His friend Dylan Thomas, during his tour of New York, once carried away some shirts which belonged to his host, who was away at the time.

Brinin, Dylan's biographer, recounts how delighted the host was. Only, he hoped Dylan had taken the correct size!

As for me, I found 'Beyond Communism' very convenient. All the same, I had to do something worthwhile for this freedom. I had to produce a poem or short story to prove my worth! This I did, but in the 10 years I was away from home, I had achieved nothing concrete. So, I returned a wiser man.

Jag Mohan, who had fallen in love with a Lankan girl, had gone ahead of me, and was working on the editorial staff of 'The Times of Ceylon' as 'art critic'. The girl, of course, refused to marry him.

It was coincidental that Tambi returned to Ceylon precisely at this time (1949). He was on a brief holiday. The fame of his name had gone before him.

He had given the younger poets of England a forum. Even Eliot had acknowledged him as the 'moving spirit behind the English poetic scene'. The Apocalyptic movement had given way to a New Romanticism. It was the age of Dylan Thomas. Tambi had published 35 issues of 'Poetry London' and earned the right to be named in the Cambridge History of English Literature.

During his brief sojourn here Tambi stayed at the Lord Nelson. I revived old memories with him, and for the first time the poet met Jag Mohan.

Jag was a good publicity man and kept Indian papers informed about Tambi's impending visit to India. He wrote to C.R. Mandy to



feature him in his column 'Gallimaufry' in the 'Illustrated Weekly of India'. He was literally Tambi's Boswell.

Tambi was quite at home at the Lord Nelson. He would drop in at the 'Times', write the 'Rhymes of the Times', collect ten rupees and spend the rest of the day wading through MSS.

If he was broke, he would borrow from the newsboy. He had never a thought for the morrow. Very often Tambi would receive letters from his drinking companions at the 'Hog and the Pound'.

Wrote Hepthseba Menuhin: 'Oh, Tambi, the Hog and the Pound is empty without you! Come soon!'

Dylan Thomas had send a handwritten copy of his well-known poem with a sketch in water colours. He had inscribed the first few lines:

'The force that through the green fu drives the flower  
Drives my green age, that blasts the root of trees Is my destroyer.'

Later Tambi presented this sketch to Jag Mohan. This is a showpiece in Delhi even today. Thanks to Jag, Tambi's visit to India was a success. When he returned he had taken to wife a well-to-do Pakistani or was it Indian wife.

What followed is now literary history. He left England for New York. In editing 'Poetry London - New York', he virtually became a literary midwife. He had to contend with the Lost generation and the Beat generation, the New York school and the San Francisco group, where Ferlingetti's 'Coney Island of the Mind' had given the younger generation of American poets a new beat.

In his introduction to Art Berger's 'Blow the Man down' Tambi decried 'the saga of carbolic cities in which we live' and the pent-houses where he shifted from time to time to ply his trade.

Tambi had become a good friend to Timoth Leary, the American poet hooked to LSD. Even if it were so Tambi was not a man who would be addicted to anything except poetry for long.

His output was prolific, though often he worked on a shoe-string budget. For two decades as literary editor in New York, he was in a class by himself. He was always in search of new ideas, new moods. His connection with the Lyre Bird Press was profitable.

Tambi had always been his own publicity man. He knew the value of showmanship. If he dined with Gloria Swanson at the Waldorf Astoria, that was news. He brought out a volume of poems to celebrate Marianne Moore's birthday. He presented the Queen and Duke with a volume of Indian love poems.

Tambi married a second time. This was Esta Smith, the daughter of Mr and Mrs Louis Smith. He was blessed with a daughter, Sakuntala Safia.

There was a small note in the papers to say: 'To Tambi, the poet who is working on his autobiography - a daughter, Sakuntala Safia.'

Tambi took great delight in the little things of life. He never forgot to inform his friends about his deep yearning to come home. But then, as Frost would say, 'Tambi had many more miles to go.'

When suddenly Tambi came back to England after an absence of 20 years, something had passed away from the scene of his youthful triumphs. Wrote the Statesman; 'Two miles and twenty years away from Fitzrovia sits Tambimuttu with a tithe of his treasures in a room 8' x 9'. He is waiting for a TV date to launch the Apple Magazine for which he has hooked the Beatles. One marvelled at the tenacity of the man.'

When I wrote to Tambi in 1958 that I was the successful winner of a short story prize, I was surprised to find that he had already read it.

He returned some of my poems which had been with him for ten

years, at the same time arranging for an American agent to translate the prize story into other languages. It brought me some exchange.

Tambi was the most unselfish person I have ever met. He wanted nothing for himself. If he had money he would spend it on some publication or other.

He was a friend to rich and poor alike. With his passing, the English literary scene has lost its most colourful personality. The plectrum of Apollo has been shattered.

Tom Ramanathan